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ABSTRACT

A survey of editors of (1) the 100 largest newspapers in the United States, and (2) 50 newspapers in state capitols was conducted to examine their policies concerning the use of unnamed sources and unattributed information in news stories, and to measure the effects of the incident in which a "Washington Post" reporter fabricated a major story and claimed that she had granted her sources confidentiality. Analysis of the responses indicated that about 32% of the newspapers had formal, written policies governing the use of anonymous sources, and about 69% had informal, oral policies concerning such use. Larger papers tended to have formal policies, while small and medium-sized dailies tended to have informal policies. The most common aspect of these policies was that editors had to know the identities of anonymous sources. Other major aspects included using anonymous sources only as a last resort, verifying anonymous information through other sources, and describing unnamed sources as fully as possible to allow readers to judge their credibility. Independent newspapers tended to have the statement "granting confidentiality to protect sources" in their policies more often than did group-owned newspapers. The "Washington Post" incident had affected the policies of most of the newspapers. About 46% indicated that to ensure accuracy they were more carefully scrutinizing stories that contained information obtained from anonymous sources. (HTH)

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NEWSPAPER DIVISION

Anonymous Sources and Related Ethical Concerns in Journalism:
Policies and Practices of Daily Newspapers

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Most major journalistic codes of ethics stress the importance of naming sources in news stories.

Pledges of confidentiality to news sources must be honored at all costs, and therefore should not be given lightly. Unless there is clear and pressing need to maintain confidences, sources of information should be identified.

American Society of Newspaper Editors
"Statement of Principles"

News sources should be disclosed unless there is clear reason not to do so. When it is necessary to protect the confidentiality of a source the reason should be explained.

Associated Press Managing Editors
"Association Code of Ethics"

So-called news communications from private sources should not be published or broadcast without substantiation of their claims to news value. Journalists acknowledge the newsman's ethic of protecting confidential sources of information.

Society of Professional Journalists, SDX
"Code of Ethics"

Most professional journalists would probably agree with the basic principles of such codes, but the overuse of unnamed sources has received a great deal of attention recently. The Janet Cooke/"Washington Post" case and similar incidents have caused most of the controversy. One purpose of this study was to review some of the commentary and research connected with the Cooke case and with the use of unnamed sources. Another purpose was to examine the policies and practices of newspapers regarding such use and related ethical questions. A final purpose was to develop a model policy governing the use of anonymous sources.

anonymous sources

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College and university textbooks on journalistic writing and reporting generally recommend complete source identification unless a source's identity must be protected for some reason.¹ The textbooks also point out that naming sources helps build credibility.

Textbooks on journalistic ethics also advise complete source identification whenever possible. Rivers and Schramm report that a news medium should clearly cite the sources of its information and the authors urge reporters to fight to get information "on-the-record."²

John Hulteng reports that adequate identification of the sources of information and opinion in stories provides readers with a basis for judging whether the information is trustworthy.³ He acknowledges there are times when such identification is impossible, though. Hulteng finds that quoting an anonymous spokesman can often lead to reporting distorted, self-serving information.⁴ He advises reporters to verify information obtained from anonymous sources.

Bruce Swain thinks that granting confidentiality to sources can be useful at times, but it can also lead to conveying misinformation or to suppressing news.⁵ He writes that readers have no basis for gauging the credibility of information provided by unnamed sources.

Most of the newspaper, magazine and journal articles on the Janet Cooke incident note the continuing loss of public confidence in press credibility, caution against the overuse of anonymous sources and suggest that editors follow rigorous standards for granting confidentiality to sources.⁶

"Newsweek" reports a Gallup Poll conducted in late April, 1981, showed only 38% of the respondents rated journalists high on honesty and ethics.⁷ About 61% believed little of what is reported by the news media. About 33% believed reporters "often make things up."

"U.S. News & World Report" sees the spreading use of anonymous sources eroding press credibility.⁸ It cites a series of ABC/Harris Polls indicating a declining number of Americans have "great confidence" in newspapers.

Cynthia Bolbach, managing editor of "Media Law Reporter," also cites the declining public confidence in the press and blames part of the problem on the overuse of confidential sources.⁹ She thinks the practice is often an effort to persuade readers that a story is "hot" and a potential prize winner.

Bolbach warns that the continued overuse of anonymous sources can undermine the legitimate use of such sources as a journalistic tool. Others also see the legal rights of reporters to keep sources confidential being jeopardized by such overuse.¹⁰

James Michener calls for more careful verification of information and more restricted use of anonymous sources.¹¹ He says abuses such as the Janet Cooke incident weaken the "central pillar" of the profession of journalism--integrity.

Norman Isaacs, the chairman of the National News Council, agrees with Michener. Isaacs says it is impossible for the public to determine the credibility of unnamed sources.¹² He suggests that instead of taking the "easy way out" and quoting unnamed sources, reporters should find out where

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the source got his information, go there and dig into documents or question other sources. Reporters who overuse anonymous sources, Isaacs says, deceive the public, lower the profession of journalism and allow themselves to be used to pass along fraudulent or self-serving information.

Isaacs acknowledges that there are valid reasons for protecting news sources. People whose jobs, property or lives might be endangered if their identities were known often deserve confidentiality, he says.¹³ Isaacs warns, though, that to grant anonymity to every political figure who leaks self-serving information or to people who have axes to grind is unprofessional, unethical and immoral.

To reduce abuses in the granting of source confidentiality, Isaacs suggests that anonymity be granted only with the direct approval of the top editorial officer at a newspaper.¹⁴ He also suggests that the major wire services follow a similar policy.

Research concerning the public's views on the use of anonymous sources tends to refute most of the recent criticisms, though. In general, John Adams finds audience members give fairly high credibility ratings to unnamed sources.¹⁵ If the sources represent some "official" organization or some "governmental" agency, they are judged most credible, though. Adams also finds that the subject matter of a story and the attitudes, prior knowledge and pre-dispositions of readers toward the subject matter play a more significant role in determining how credible a story is judged than does the source of the information.¹⁶

Culbertson and Somerick find that most people know what is going on when

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sources go unnamed in stories and people accept the practice.¹⁷ A Gallup Poll finds that 83% of the people surveyed felt it was probably necessary for reporters to conceal the sources of their information sometimes and only 13% felt reporters should always reveal their sources.¹⁸

Fedler and Counts find that people perceive a controversial story to be most accurate and fair when no source is quoted as opposed to quoting an unnamed source, a named source or two opposing named sources.¹⁹ For a non-controversial story, the method of source identification does not seem to make any differences concerning perceived fairness or accuracy.

The use of anonymous sources is apparently fairly common, especially in stories concerning government.²⁰ Stephen Hess finds that reporters in Washington D.C. say approximately 28% of their interviews are "off-the-record."²¹ Hess also finds that about 13% of quotations in newspapers are not attributed to a named source. Front page stories and stories about foreign policy contain the greatest number of anonymous sources.

Culbertson finds that about 75% of "Time" and "Newsweek" stories contain such sources and about 33% of newspaper stories do so.²² In an analysis of stories about social issues, Michael Ryan reports that 61% of all sentences had no attribution and over 10% of all sentences which contained opinions, inferences or judgments had no attribution.²³

Generally, journalists have been found to support accepted professional codes of ethics and to perform their jobs in a "professional" manner.²⁴ Editors have shown some ambivalence concerning the use of anonymous sources,

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though.²⁵ They say the practice is often a necessary evil, but most stories which use such sources could be based on "on-the-record" comments if reporters pressed for them.²⁶

The National News Council conducted an examination of the Janet Cooke incident and surveyed over 30 newspaper editors across the United States in conjunction with the study. The council finds that newspapers are tightening procedures regarding the use of anonymous sources, are requiring that at least one editor know the identity of any confidential source, are providing as much identification about a source as possible even if his name is concealed and are explaining to readers why a source is granted confidentiality.²⁷ The council condemns the overuse of anonymous sources and suggests editors be more diligent in their control and supervision of reporters.

Research Questions

In an effort to find out more about unnamed sources and unattributed information in news stories and to measure the effects of the Janet Cooke incident on newspapers, a survey of newspaper editors was conducted during December-February, 1981-82. The following primary research questions were addressed:

1. How many newspapers have formal, written policies concerning the use of anonymous sources?
2. How many newspapers have informal, oral policies concerning the use of anonymous sources?

3. What are the basic elements of newspaper policies concerning the use of anonymous sources?

4. What have been the effects of the Janet Cooke incident on newspaper policies concerning the use of anonymous sources and related ethical questions?

5. What have been the effects of the Janet Cooke incident on the news media in general?

Secondary research questions covered how frequently the following selected practices were observed:

1. Identifying stories which contain reporter opinion, commentary or analysis.

2. Giving individuals who are charged with misconduct an opportunity to respond to the charges prior to publication.

3. Invading a person's privacy without sure warrant of the public's right to know.

4. Correcting promptly any mistakes of fact.

5. Checking on the accuracy of stories reported by less experienced staffers.

6. Checking on the accuracy of stories reported by more experienced staffers.

7. Using anonymous sources.

8. Honoring pledges of confidentiality to sources.

9. Requiring that editors know the identity of confidential sources.

10. Checking the academic credentials of prospective employees.
11. Checking the professional credentials of prospective employees.
12. Using composite characters in stories.
13. Encouraging participation in journalistic contests.

Differences between group-owned and independent newspapers and among newspapers with various circulation sizes were also desired.²⁸

Methods

The survey instrument was developed after extensive consultation with professional journalists and journalism educators. Originally, it contained 50 questions, but was reduced to 35 questions after a pre-test. Some questions were open-ended, some required "yes/no" indications and others asked for frequency determinations ranging from "always" to "never."

In early December, 1981, questionnaires were mailed to the editors of the 100 largest newspapers (by circulation) in the United States and to a randomly drawn sample of 50 editors of newspapers in state capitals.²⁹ A cover letter and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope accompanied each questionnaire. In the cover letter, the following definition of the "use of unnamed sources and unattributed information" was given:

...the reporting of opinion, speculation or alleged "facts" without citing the source of the information by name. By our definition, such identification techniques as "an informed source," "a spokesman for the mayor" and "a reliable source," plus such speculative phrases as "it is believed," "it is reported" and "it is alleged" would be examples of using unnamed sources and unattributed information.

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In late January, 1982, a reminder letter was sent. In all, 70 questionnaires were returned (46% return rate), but five were not completed, so only 65 were used in the final analysis.

Responses were key punched on standard IBM 80-column computer cards. Analyses were conducted using SPSS computer techniques such as frequencies, crosstabulations and correlations.

Findings

(Policies)

About 32% of the newspapers had formal, written policies governing the use of anonymous sources. About 69% had informal, oral policies concerning such use. (See Table 1)

About 5% of the newspapers had both formal and informal policies, 27% had only a formal policy, 65% had only an informal policy and 3% had no policy at all. The Pearson correlation of the two policy types was highly negative. (Pearson $r = -.8224$, $p < .001$).

More larger than smaller dailies tended to have formal policies. Small and medium-sized dailies tended to have informal policies more often than did large dailies.

(Policy Elements)

The most common aspect of newspaper policies concerning the use of anonymous sources was that editors had to know the identities of such sources. (See Table 2) Other major aspects included using anonymous sources as a last resort only, verifying information obtained from such sources and describing such sources

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in stories as fully as possible without revealing their identities. Less prominent aspects included granting confidentiality to protect the life, property or job of a source, forbidding personal attacks by anonymous sources, trusting the competency of reporters, forbidding the use of anonymous sources and granting confidentiality to "official" sources only.

Independent newspapers tended to have "granting confidentiality to protect sources" in their policies more often than did group-owned newspapers. The policies of small dailies contained "editors must know the identities of confidential sources" more often than did the policies of other newspapers.

(Cooke Case Effects on Policies)

The Janet Cooke incident had affected the policies of most of the newspapers. About 46% indicated they were now more carefully scrutinizing stories which contained information obtained from anonymous sources to ensure accuracy.

(See Table 3) Other effects included more often requiring that editors be told the identities of confidential sources, more thoroughly checking the academic and professional credentials of prospective employees and more often describing anonymous sources as fully as possible in stories.

About 12% of the newspapers had restated existing policies concerning the use of anonymous sources and about 12% had created new policies concerning such use. About 35% of the newspapers indicated that the Janet Cooke incident had not affected their policies in any way.

More independent than group-owned newspapers tended to indicate they were now requiring reporters to reveal the identities of confidential sources

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to editors, but more group-owned than independent newspapers tended to report that they were identifying confidential sources as fully as possible in stories.

In general, large newspapers indicated they had been less affected by the Janet Cooke incident than had other newspapers. Small newspapers indicated they were now scrutinizing stories more carefully and were now demanding that reporters reveal the names of confidential sources to editors more often than did other newspapers.

(Cooke Case Effects on News Media)

Most of the newspaper editors felt the Janet Cooke incident definitely had affected news media credibility. About 12% said credibility had been greatly diminished and 80% said it had been at least somewhat diminished. (See Table 4) About 74% thought the news media were now more conscious of ensuring the accuracy of information obtained from confidential sources.

Editors for large newspapers perceived a greater degree of diminished credibility than did other editors, but tended to perceive the media as being less conscious about ensuring the accuracy of information obtained from anonymous sources.

(Selected Practices Frequencies)

Most editors indicated their newspapers regularly identified stories which contain reporter opinion, commentary or analysis; gave persons accused of misconduct an opportunity to respond to the charges prior to publication; refused to invade a person's privacy unless justified by the public's right to

know; and corrected mistakes promptly. (See Table 5)

About 79% of the editors said their newspapers rarely used unnamed sources in stories, but 89% reported that when pledges of confidentiality were given, they were honored. About 79% said they or some other editor always had to be told the names of such sources, though.

About 56% of the editors indicated that regular checks were made on the accuracy of stories written by inexperienced reporters. About 41% said similar checks were made of stories written by veteran reporters. Most newspapers followed a regular pattern of checking on accuracy regardless of the experience of the reporters involved. (Pearson $r=+.7882$, $p < .001$)

About 61% of the editors reported their newspapers regularly checked the academic credentials of prospective employees. About 89% said they regularly checked the professional credentials of such individuals. Generally, newspapers followed a fairly consistent pattern of checking credentials. (Pearson $r=+.5489$, $p < .001$)

Few editors indicated that their newspapers used composite characters in stories. About 84% said they never used them. Journalistic contests were generally accepted. About 67% of the editors said they regularly encouraged reporters to enter such contests.

In the selected practices, only two statistically significant differences were found between group-owned and independent newspapers and among newspapers in the three circulation categories. Independent newspapers checked academic credentials more regularly than did group-owned newspapers. Medium-sized

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newspapers promptly corrected mistakes less regularly than did other newspapers.

There were some pronounced tendencies for large newspapers to observe certain practices more regularly than smaller newspapers. Large newspapers tended to identify stories which contain reporter opinion or analysis more often, to refuse to invade a person's privacy without sure warrant of the public's right to know more often, to use anonymous sources more often and to check on the academic and professional credentials of prospective employees more often.

Discussion

(Summary)

Almost all of the newspapers surveyed in this study had some type of policy concerning the use of anonymous sources. Most policies stressed that confidentiality should be granted only as a last resort to protect the life, property or job of a source. Most editors demanded that reporters tell them the names of confidential sources. Reporters were also expected to verify the information obtained from such sources and to describe the sources as fully as possible so that readers would be able to judge the credibility of the information.

The Janet Cooke incident had prompted newspapers to check more carefully the accuracy of stories based on information obtained from anonymous sources, to demand more often that editors be told the names of such sources and to check more thoroughly the academic and professional credentials of prospective

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employees. About a third of the editors said the incident had had no effect on the policies of their newspapers.

Most of the editors thought the incident had had a positive and a negative effect on the news media in general. They thought the incident had at least somewhat diminished the credibility of the media, but that newspapers were now more concerned about ensuring the accuracy of stories containing information obtained from unnamed sources.

Most editors indicated they generally followed accepted professional guidelines in their handling of sensitive subject matter. They said they rarely allowed the use of unnamed sources or composite characters and made fairly regular checks of the accuracy of stories. The editors reported their newspapers regularly checked the academic and professional credentials of prospective employees. Most newspapers also encouraged reporters to enter journalistic contests.

Newspapers were reasonably homogeneous. Few statistically significant differences between group-owned and independent newspapers or among newspapers with circulations over 200,000, between 200,000 and 100,000 and under 100,000 were found.

(Model Policy)

A model policy governing the use of unnamed sources can easily be developed from the findings of this study. The policy would require that confidentiality be granted only when there is no other way to obtain the desired information and

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only after the top editorial officer is told the identity of the source and has agreed to the granting of anonymity.

The policy would also require that readers be given the reasons for the granting of confidentiality and that unnamed sources be described in stories as fully as possible to allow readers to judge the credibility of the information obtained from such sources. Finally, the policy would require that all information obtained from confidential sources be verified by at least two other sources.

(Limitations/Suggestions)

A larger sample would increase the representativeness of the findings. Future research might survey smaller daily newspapers and possibly even weekly newspapers.

Actual content analyses of newspaper stories would complement the self-report data on the frequency of the use of anonymous sources. The editors reported rare use of such sources, but research tends to refute their claims. In addition, it would be useful to discover the specific criteria used to determine when to grant confidentiality to a source and the policies of newspapers concerning wire service stories which contain information attributed to unnamed sources.

Despite its limitations, this study does provide valuable, new information concerning the use of unnamed sources and unattributed information in the news stories of the largest daily newspapers in the United States. This study also contributes to the knowledge of the effects of the Janet Cooke incident on the policies and practices of those same newspapers.

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28 "Group-owned" newspapers were those owned by Knight-Ridder, Gannett, Hearst, Times-Mirror, Scripps-Howard and Newhouse, Circulation-size categories were (1) 200,000+ (2) 100,000-200,000 (3) 100,000.

29 Source: 1981 Editor & Publisher, International Yearbook.

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TABLE 1

Newspapers That Have Policies Concerning the Use of Anonymous Sources in News Stories in Percent by Affiliation and Circulation Size

TYPE OF POLICY	ALL NEWSPAPERS (N=65)	AFFILIATION		CIRCULATION SIZE		
		GROUP (22)	INDEP (43)	200K+ (18)	100K+ (29)	-100K (18)
Formal/Written Policy	32	36	30	39	35	22
Informal/Oral Policy	69	73	67	56	72	78

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TABLE 2.

Newspaper Policy Elements Concerning the Use of Anonymous Sources in Percent
By Affiliation and Circulation Size

POLICY ELEMENT	ALL NEWSPAPERS (N=65)	AFFILIATION		CIRCULATION SIZE		
		GROUP (22)	INDEP (43)	200K+ (18)	100K+ (29)	-100K (18)
Editors Must Know Names of Sources	86	86	86	67	90	100*
Use as a Last Resort	70	73	67	67	79	56
Verify Information	40	41	40	39	41	39
Describe Source Fully	28	32	26	28	35	17
Use to Protect Source	17	9	21	17	17	17
No Personal Attacks Allowed	17	14	19	12	17	17
Trust Reporters' Judgment	6	9	5	17	3	0
Forbid Use	5	0	7	11	3	0
Use Only if Source is "Official"	3	6	3	11	0	0

* $p < .05^a$

^a Statistical significance determined by chi-square procedures on all variables for all tables.

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TABLE 3

Perceived Effects of Janet Cooke/"Washington Post" Incident on Newspaper Policies
In Percent by Affiliation and Circulation Size

EFFECT	ALL NEWSPAPERS (N=65)	AFFILIATION		CIRCULATION SIZE		
		GROUP (22)	INDEP (43)	200K+ (18)	100K+ (29)	-100K (18)
No Effect	35	36	35	39	41	22
Scrutinize Stories More	46	46	47	33	38	72*
Reveal Names of Sources To Editors	40	32	44	11	45	61*
Check Professional Credentials More	31	32	30	11	35	44
Check Academic Credentials More	31	27	33	22	35	33
Identify Sources More Fully	20	27	16	6	31	17
Restate a Policy	12	18	9	6	21	6
Create a Policy	12	9	14	17	10	11

* p < .05

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TABLE 4

Perceived Effects of Janet Cooke/"Washington Post" Incident on Mass Media
In Percent by Affiliation and Circulation Size

EFFECT	ALL NEWSPAPERS (N=65)	AFFILIATION		CIRCULATION SIZE		
		GROUP	INDEP	200K+	100K+	-100K
		(22)	(43)	(18)	(29)	(18)
Diminished Credibility Somewhat	80	73	84	72	86	79
Diminished Credibility Greatly	12	9	14	28	3	11*
Prompted More Attention To Accuracy of Information	74	77	72	56	83	78
No Effect	2	5	0	6	0	0

* $p < .05$

TABLE 5

Frequency of Observance of Selected Practices in Percent by Affiliation and Circulation Size

PRACTICE	ALL NEWSPAPERS (N=65)	AFFILIATION		CIRCULATION SIZE		
		GROUP (22)	INDEP (43)	200K+ (18)	100K+ (29)	<100K (18)
Identify Stories Which Contain Reporter Opinion						
Always	75	76	74	94	61	78
Most Times	22	24	21	6	36	17
Average	3	0	5	0	3	5
Rarely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Give Persons Charged With Misconduct an Opportunity To Respond to Charges						
Always	73	70	74	72	67	83
Most Times	24	30	21	28	30	11
Average	2	0	3	0	3	0
Rarely	1	0	2	0	0	6
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0

continued...

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TABLE 5 (cont.)

PRACTICE	ALL NEWSPAPERS	GROUP	INDEP	200K+	100K+	<100K
Refuse to Invade a Person's Privacy Without Good Cause						
Always	54	60	51	72	52	37
Most Times	42	35	46	28	40	63
Average	4	5	3	0	8	0
Rarely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Correct Mistakes Promptly						
Always	89	86	91	94	79	100*
Most Times	11	14	9	6	21	0
Average	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rarely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Check Accuracy of Rookie Reporters' Stories						
Always	10	9	10	13	15	0
Most Times	46	43	47	37	52	44
Average	16	19	15	13	7	34
Rarely	26	24	28	31	26	22
Never	2	5	0	6	0	0

* $p < .05$

continued...

anonymous sources
25-25-25

TABLE 5(cont.)

PRACTICE	ALL NEWSPAPERS	GROUP	INDEP	200K+	100K+	-100K
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Check Accuracy of Veteran
Reporters' Stories

Always	14	5	10	12	11	0
Most Times	27	33	18	25	26	17
Average	21	19	25	13	22	33
Rarely	35	33	42	38	37	44
Never	3	10	5	12	4	6

Use Anonymous Sources
In News Stories

Always	1	4	0	6	0	0
Most Times	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average	20	24	17	29	11	22
Rarely	76	67	81	59	85	78
Never	3	5	2	6	4	0

Honor Pledges
Of Confidentiality

Always	89	90	88	94	93	78
Most Times	8	10	7	6	7	11
Average	3	0	5	0	0	11
Rarely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0

continued...

anonymous sources
26-26-26

TABLE 5(cont.)

PRACTICE	ALL NEWSPAPERS	GROUP	INDEP	200K+	100K+	-100K
Require That Editors Know the Identity of Confidential Sources						
Always	79	80	79	77	78	83
Most Times	14	15	14	12	15	17
Average	5	5	5	11	4	0
Rarely	2	0	2	0	3	0
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Check the Academic Credentials Of Prospective Employees						
Always	36	29	40*	56	32	22
Most Times	25	19	28	22	21	33
Average	19	38	9	5	29	17
Rarely	20	14	23	17	18	28
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Check the Professional Credentials Of Prospective Employees						
Always	66	57	70	83	61	56
Most Times	23	33	19	17	21	33
Average	6	10	4	0	11	6
Rarely	5	0	7	0	7	5
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0

* p < .05

continued...

anonymous sources
27-27-27

TABLE 5(cont.)

PRACTICE	ALL NEWSPAPERS	GROUP	INDEP	200K+	100K+	-100K
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Use Composite Characters
In News Stories

✓ Always	0	0	0	0	0	0
Most Times	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average	6	5	2	0	7	0
Rarely	13	9	14	11	18	6
Never	84	86	84	89	75	94

Encourage Reporters to Enter
Journalistic Contests

Always	32	29	33	33	30	33
Most Times	35	47	29	28	37	39
Average	22	19	24	22	22	22
Rarely	11	5	14	17	11	6
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0